

God Will Find a Way to Reach Us

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.

The very first verse of Romans 2: 14-29 is: "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law."

The phrase "a law to themselves" is one of many Scriptural verses that in our modern culture have taken on a different meaning from the one the original writer intended. When we hear this phrase, we think of people who go their own way, following their personal inclinations rather than adhering to the rules and norms that govern other people's lives.

But Saint Paul had something far different in mind. He goes on to say that Gentiles, the non-Jews who do not know the Law of the Old Testament, "show that what the law requires is written on their hearts." This is why they can "do by nature what the law requires." God has put in their hearts an understanding of the way He wants people to live. He reaches these Gentiles not by giving them the law, as He did to the Jewish people, but by giving them a natural inclination to obey Him and a conscience that "also bears witness." So their hearts are their law, and in this sense they are a "law to themselves."

Then Saint Paul addresses those who do have the law, his fellow Jews. He cautions them that being "instructed in the law" is not enough. In fact, it can imperil their salvation if they only know it and do not keep it in their daily lives. He writes, "You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?" Paul respects the law, but by itself it cannot save.

As an example, he writes that circumcision, a basic practice of the Jews, has no meaning if the circumcised person is unfaithful to God: "He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal." Once again, Saint Paul is describing God's effort to reach us. For Jews, the response to God's reaching begins with the written law, but must become something that is felt from the heart. Similarly, true circumcision is not physical but spiritual. God reaches the Jews by giving them these outward things—law and circumcision—and guiding them to a deeper, "inward" understanding.

Saint Paul wants those he's addressing to know one thing: God can reach anyone who is ready to be reached, whether Jew or Gentile. So he writes: "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also since God is one; and He will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law."